

DISCLAIMER: If you've read it before, it might not be mine. Main Characters and backstory belong to JKR. I write for my own amusement and hopefully yours and not for \$\$\$.

A/N: First of my fics publihsed. Be nice. Rating is for occasional bad language. You want graphic sex or extreme bloodshed - yes I have stories with that but this is not one of them.

## CHAPTER ONE

SATURDAY - JUNE 17, 2006 - NEW YORK CITY, N.Y.

She hated business trips really. She hated them because they took her away from her son and daughter. They were twins and only six years old. Fortunately, since her father died her mother and younger sister lived with her and watched over them when she was away. This trip was the worst in her opinion. It would be the longest time she spent away from her children since they were born. She had left home last night and would be here for a whole week. It was now Saturday morning and she was in the hotel lobby ordering her breakfast. The conference she was attending did not start until Monday, but her boss wanted her here early to make sure everything was in order. She checked last night when she checked in. Everything was in order and now she had nothing to do for the next two days.

Well, she thought, it's not like there's nothing to do. I am in New York City after all. Maybe I could do some shopping. She really had no idea what she would shop for. The business trips were the price she paid for her salary. She was now a Marketing Associate for Pak Riley Corporation, a major research and development firm in St. Louis. Her job was to sell their products and this conference could be a big deal maker for her company. It was both hers and their first major international exhibition and there would be potential buyers from all over the world - and most critically Europe. That was Monday. Today, she had nothing to do.

She had just ordered and was reading her complimentary paper waiting for her breakfast to arrive.

"May I join you?" A man's voice asked. "Every other table is full and I am famished."

She nodded but hoped he would not try and chat her up. She found that annoying in the extreme. "Thank you," he said. His voice was accented. He was not an American. Well, neither am I really, she thought. Unless she was mistaken, her new table companion was from Britain. So was she - once.

She listened to his accent as he ordered his breakfast and remembered a part of her thought of her life long ago. It seemed like that had not been her life at all.

"Bloody hate business trips," he said. "Annoying really." She nodded in agreement trying to read an article about some scandal or another. "Worse when I have to cross the pond," he continued. "Though it's easier flying west than it is flying east, don't you think?" She nodded absently.

"I guess it could be worse," he sighed.

She now wanted to tell him to be quiet. She wasn't in the mood for any conversation. She put down her paper and looked at the man at her table for the first time. She almost died of a heart attack she would later think when she saw who was seated at her table.

"Hermione Granger, I presume," he said. She knew him instantly. The raven hair and bright green eyes, she had known him years ago and this was the last place she thought she'd run into him. She could feel the blood drain from her face as her jaw dropped.

"Relax," he said. "This is just a coincidence. I'm here for some bloody conference regarding recent research and stuff. Bloody waste of time if you ask me. I'm a Field Agent, not a bloody R&D type. But I got tapped for this so there you go and here we are."

She wanted to leave, but now knew she could not. He was here for the same conference so this potentially awkward meeting was unavoidable - unless she wanted to lose her job. "Harry, I..." she started.

"I am pleased to see the rumors back home are unfounded," Harry said with a smile.

"Rumors?"

"Oh, there all kinds. The most common one is that you were killed and are moldering in some unmarked grave somewhere. Every few months since you left if there is a slow news day the Daily Prophet comes up with its new theory of what happened to Hermione Granger. My particular favorite is that you were really an alien and have returned to your home world." Harry chuckled. "It's really quite pathetic."

"Harry..."

"I understand if you don't want to tell me where you've been these last seven years. But forgive me if I am curious."

"Harry..."

"In case you're wondering, no I did not come looking for you after you disappeared. Wanted to. I really did. But things were so hectic I never found the time and when things calmed down I figured the trail had long since gone cold. No point then. It was obvious you were not coming back, so why look? So, what brings you to New York? I assume that's a safe question."

"Apparently the same thing that brought you here."

"Really? Buying or selling?"

"I'm a marketing agent for a company in St. Louis." And she explained to him what she did.

"You've been here a while, haven't you," Harry said when she finished.

"I only got in last night."

"No. I mean you've been living here in America for a while."

"How..."

"I'm a pretty good cop, Hermione. Your accent. There's still a trace of home, but it's barely noticeable. You talk like an American - not that there's anything wrong with that."

"I should think not. Cop? I thought you were an Auror."

"There have been a lot of changes back home since you left Hermione. A lot of changes. Perhaps a proper introduction is in order? I am Chief Inspector Harry Potter, Deputy Director, Major Crimes and Special Operations Department, Royal National Magical Police."

"What's that?"

"We deal with capital crimes in Britain: murder, rape, unforgivables and we conduct foreign operations against terrorists and the Voldemort remnants and wannabes. We reformed law enforcement soon after you left. Our police force is now modeled after the Magical Section of the American FBI. My Department deals with the worst of the mutts. Just closed a nasty serial killer case a few weeks ago. That was one sick puppy."

"Things have changed," Hermione observed.

"Whole government, in fact. The Ministry is now strictly the executive branch. Technically, we're part of the Ministry. In reality, the Minister's only control over us is through the budgeting process. The Wizengamot is gone. We now have an elected Parliament that passes laws and a separate court system to enforce them. You'd be pleased to learn that the House Elves have seats in the Legislature and their own bureau in the Ministry itself."

"Really?"

"Yep. You'd hardly recognize the place."

Hermione thought for a while. She had not seen Harry in almost seven years, not since the day he brought her to Heathrow. He seemed surprisingly cheerful. She wondered. She had left that day and never heard from him again, and yet he was acting as if nothing happened. She was sure he was upset with her disappearance. She would have been. She was. Had she been told she would run into him, she would have thought he'd be less of a stranger and more upset with her. Something was very different than she had expected.

"How's Ron," she finally asked?

"As I said," Harry replied, his mood suddenly sullen, "things have changed. I try not to think about him."

"Harry?"

Harry sighed. "I haven't spoken to Ron in years, Hermione. Our friendship ended the day he broke your heart."

"I - I never wanted that."

"I know. But you were not the self centered idiot who crushed my other best friend's soul for his own personal pleasure."

SATURDAY - JUNE 26, 1999 - 12 GRIMMAULD PLACE, LONDON, U.K.

Harry was watching his new television. Ginny was at home with her parents and would not be coming over for a few days and Harry was relaxing after a hard week at work. He was startled by a pounding on his door. He grumbled as he was enjoying the movie on the telly and went to the door. He opened it and Hermione was standing there in tears. She seemed almost hysterical and certainly inconsolable. She pushed passed him and into his living room. She ignored everything for a while before she finally realized he was there.

"Hermione?" Harry asked.

"It's OVER," she bawled!

"What is? What's over?"

"Ron and me!"

"I'm sure it's not that bad, Hermione."

"ARE YOU? WERE YOU THERE JUST NOW? IS SHAGGING ANOTHER WOMAN OKAY?"

"What? What are you talking about?" Harry could smell that she had been drinking.

"I wanted to surprise him. Term ended yesterday and the train came today and I decided to skip it and apparate to his flat and surprise him hours before the train arrived in London.," she cried. "I have a key, you know."

Harry nodded.

"So I walk in and hear - and hear a woman moaning from the living room, Harry! Calling HIS name! It sounded like - sex! So I went in and there was Ron bare assed and going at it with LAVENDER BROWN!"

There was nothing Harry could say in reply to his friend.

"They never noticed me, all wrapped up in each other as they were and I was too stunned to do anything. I slipped back into the hall, left Ron a note and my engagement ring. It's over!"

Harry nodded. He really did not know what else to do.

"Oooh, but he's sure to get the point! I caught him and he knows!"

"What do you mean, Hermione?"

"I didn't write the note on a piece of parchment! I used my wand and graffitied it on the walls of his fucking front hall. Made it indelible! No paint - other than black paint - will cover it up! He'll either have to paint his whole house black or replace the damn wall!" She seemed to shudder with a thrill for her ingenuity Harry noted. Harry also knew she was pissed: both angry and drunk. She never used such language before so far as he could remember.

"What time did you get to Ron's?" Harry asked.

"WHY THE HELL DO YOU CARE?"

"Because - well - you seem to have been drinking - a lot, Hermione."

"Why do you care?"

"Because I care about you, Hermione. I - I..."

"You do?"

Harry nodded. "You know I always have."

'Sometimes you've got a f-funny way of showin' it.'

Harry looked at her questioningly. When she was sober, all it took was a look to ask a question. She would know he wanted to know what she meant. He had looks for her, she had looks for him. Somehow, they could communicate without talking. Harry did not know if that silent communication worked when she was trashed.

"When Ron ran out on us during the War," she said. "Y-you ignored me."

"I did not," Harry protested!

"You let me bawl my eyes out! You didn't offer me a shoulder to cry on or anything!"

"I - I thought..."

"What?"

"I thought you needed your space."

"Damn it Harry! I needed you to be my friend!"

"I thought I was being your friend."

"Well, you were wrong! I wanted you to hold me and make the pain go away."

Harry started to tear up. He thought she had appreciated him leaving her alone and not - not doing anything he thought might violate their trust. For the first time, he now knew she had needed him and he had failed her. The revelation was killing him inside.

"I would have if..." Harry could not finish the sentence.

"IF WHAT," Hermione yelled.

"If you had asked," Harry replied.

"WHY SHOULD I? I THOUGHT YOU WERE MY FRIEND!"

"I am, Hermione. I always have been and always will be. But, I was a stupid, seventeen year old boy who knew next to nothing about girls."

"And now?"

"Now I'm a stupid eighteen year old boy who knows next to nothing about girls."

"And w-what about me?" she asked in a scared voice.

"I - I know you probably better than anyone," Harry said softly. "But I cannot read your mind. Like to, but that would be rude. While I'd like to think I'm pretty good at reading you..."

"You are," she said. She then laughed for some reason Harry could not fathom.

"I also know I'm not perfect. I'm sorry, Hermione. Sorry for not being there for you then. I'm here for you now, though."

She smiled at him for a moment, but then her face changed. Her mouth opened as if in pain. Her eyes crushed themselves shut and Harry could see tears falling and saw her shoulders heaving, even though she made no sound at all. Her hands were pulled up under her chin as she shook with silent tears.

I'm here for her now, Harry thought. He walked up to her and pulled her into a hug. Gently, he pulled her head to his chest and felt her shake and felt her tears. Finally, she began to cry vocally, and he pulled her as close as he could, rubbing her back and kissing her beautiful - if seemingly unmanageable brown, curly hair. He could not help but smell her and to his embarrassment was enraptured by the smell. He wanted her even closer, but prayed she kept her arms in front of her. His "involuntary" reaction to holding his friend and beautiful young woman - he thought - so close scared him and, should she realize it might scare her as well. He did not want that. All he wanted - all he had ever wanted for her - was for Hermione to be happy.



As she cried, he was lost in thought. Ron was his best mate, had been since he first met Ron almost eight years ago. Hermione, however, was his best friend - again practically since they first met almost eight years ago. He could tell her things he could never tell anyone else. Ron and he had had their fights over the years. Most arose because Ron had a massive inferiority complex, which Harry thought might explain what Hermione had walked in to find a few hours ago. Hermione and Harry had had their tiffs as well. But there was a difference. She never stopped caring for him and their spats were when she had done what she thought was best for him and he acted like an immature git as a result.

He had always feared this day. Ron and Hermione had begun dating officially about a year ago, just as the War ended. Deep down, there was a part of Harry that wanted her too, but she seemed to have a thing for Ron and Ron for her and he knew it. He feared what would happen if either he or Ron had started dating Hermione and then the relationship failed. He knew he would have to take a side - Ron or Hermione. He feared losing either or both of his best friends. Now, that day was here. To Harry's surprise, the choice was easy: Hermione!

"It's okay," Harry whispered.

"It's NOT okay," she cried back. "H-he b-broke m-my heart! I h-hate him!"

"I know."

"I NEVER WANT TO SEE THAT BASTARD AGAIN!"

Part of Harry hoped that was not true. Another part knew she was serious and meant it. Hermione was not perfect - who was? But one thing this broken friend of his was not and would never be was a doormat. Lavender was. Maybe that was what Ron wanted in a girlfriend - someone he could treat like dirt and get away with it.

"Then don't," Harry said.

"W-what? B-b-but I love him!"

"And he obviously does not love you," Harry said.

"H-h-how can y-you s-say th-that? D-d-did h-he t-t-tell y-y-you?"

"No. But if he loved you - truly loved you - you would not be here now and he would not have been..."

"FUCK HIM," Hermione wailed!

"Sorry."

"What?"

"Don't like Lavender's sloppy seconds," Harry quipped.

"Bastard!"

Harry shrugged and tightened the hug.

"He broke my heart, Harry," she cried.

"I know," Harry said soothingly.

"AGAIN!"

"I know."

"HOW COULD I BE SO STUPID!"

"Hush! You're not stupid, Hermione. You're the smartest, kindest and most special person I've ever known."

"And yet I couldn't see this!"

"That makes two of us, Hermione. Until just now, I had no reason to think that he was..."

"You were here - in London - with him all this year! I was stuck in school, Harry! What do you mean you did not know?"

"He got his own flat, you know."

"I know. I helped him pick it out. He didn't..."

"Didn't want to be beholden to me for a place to live. Goodness knows, Hermione, I offered him a room here. You know he flat out refused. Bugger hated feeling like he was second class or something. You remember, don't you?"

She chuckled reluctantly. Ron could be such an insecure git, she thought.

TUESDAY - JULY 14, 1998 - 12 GRIMMAULD PLACE, LONDON, U.K.

The "Golden Trio," Harry scoffed. Another one of the totally stupid names the press had forced upon him over his brief lifetime, Harry thought, except now they dragged his two best friends into that cesspool with him. Bah! So what? So we beat - killed - the most dangerous Dark Wizard in memory? So what? I'm not even eighteen! You bastards want to lionize me and my friends? Wait until we have a lifetime of accomplishments, not a moment's fleeting glory in the sun at the dawn of our young lives! But the press has a bloody nutter of a mind of its own, Harry thought.

He and his two best friends stood at the door of the house he had inherited from his Godfather. Over the past couple of weeks Harry had the place completely renovated while he, Ron and Hermione lived at Ron's parent's place - the Burrow. Harry was now moving in at last. He had brought his friends here to make them an offer. They were all acting Aurors now, hunting down the remnants of Voldemort's followers. Hermione was only a temp as she intended to return for her final year of school. Harry and Ron (and Neville, for that matter) were now permanent additions to the elite Auror Corps, the youngest ever. Then again, as most of the Corps died in the war, their youth was not that unexpected given their wartime accomplishments.

Grimmauld Place had been an old, dark, horribly out of date Garden House near the Camden Towne section of London. It was large. Below the Ground Floor was a large basement which contained the Kitchen. It then had a Ground Floor, three upper floors and an attic. There had been a guest bedroom on the First Floor along with the Drawing Room. The Ground Floor had a Parlor and the Dining Room. A Study / Library and another bedroom had occupied the Second Floor. The Master Suites were on the Third Floor, and two bedrooms were in the Attic. It had been practically gutted in the

renovation. The Ground Floor and First Floor were mostly open spaces now. The Ground Floor was the "public room" for dining and entertaining. The First Floor was now the main room for relaxation and less formal gatherings, although it also contained the guest bedroom as Harry thought of it. Harry's study / library and a bedroom occupied the second floor. The rest of the floor plans were virtually unchanged, but the rooms - except for the two attic rooms (for now) had been renovated.

Harry was having electricity, telephones, cable television and internet installed. Although Harry had a House Elf as a servant, he had installed modern "Muggle" (non-magical) appliances in the old kitchen. Harry had been forced to cook for his Aunt and Uncle as a boy. While he hated cooking for them he did enjoy cooking and was more than willing to expand his talents in that arena now that he had a place of his own. Maybe not every meal, but he did like to experiment with his cooking. Although he could use magic to cook, having been brought up in a non-magical house he preferred to "cook by hand" as Ron derisively called the method used by most of the world.

Out back of the house was a large but long neglected garden that was now his House Elf Kreature's main task in life. Behind the garden there was an old Carriage House he had renovated into a garage. The house had an upper floor that had been servant's quarters when the place was built in the 1850's. It had been filled with ages of junk. He had turned it into a recreation room. The ground level was now a four car garage. He was thinking about learning to drive and buying a car.

"So," he said after he gave his friends the grand tour, "what do you think?"

"I hardly recognize the place, Harry," Hermione said. "It's lovely!"

"It'll do I suppose," Ron moped. Ron had issues with money. More annoyingly Ron had issues with the fact that Harry had lots of it inherited from his family and his Godfather.

"You two are more than welcome to live here," he said.

"That would be wonderful," Hermione said, looking at her boyfriend

Ron.

"I don't know," Ron said. "I mean, I guess for a bit. But I'm dating Hermione now and your dating my sister and unless I am seriously mistaken, both are pretty serious. I really don't want to know what you and my baby sister are up to, if you know what I mean. I'm sure you don't want to know what Hermione and I are..."

"RON," Hermione shot back!

"Dear? I mean - well..."

"It's a big house, Ron," Harry said. "Much too big for one person. It's not like Gin and I are going to be married anytime soon. She still has another year of school and..."

"And I already told you, Ronald," Hermione said crossly, "I am going back to take my final year."

"You know you don't have to," Ron complained.

"I WANT TO! You know I want to take my exams!"

"But 'Mione, you don't need to! You can be an Auror..."

"Maybe I don't want to be one Ronald. Did you ever think of that? Did you? Maybe I want to do something different."

"Like what?"

"I DON'T KNOW! Look, Ronald. Maybe you think chasing around after Dark Wizards is loads of fun, but I don't! The only reason I have done that and am doing it is because of you two. But I know I don't want to do that for the rest of my life. I want to keep my options open!"

"I'm just saying..."

"DON'T! DON'T SAY ANYTHING! Damn it Ronald, I want to do something else. I just don't know what yet, okay?"

"I - I guess."

"And I think living here - at least at first is brilliant!"

"Damn it I don't!"

"Why not?" Harry and Hermione asked.

"I told you! I don't want to know what Ginny and Harry are up to, okay?"

"Is that it, Ronald?" Hermione asked.

"Yes - well - no! I can afford a flat now. I want a place of my own - of our own, 'Mione."

"Oh," she said. "I guess..."

"Thank you," Ron replied! "Look. We can stay here until you go back to school or so. But by then I want our own flat, okay?"

"Sounds great," Hermione said. Harry was not convinced she was sincere.

"Besides, I don't want - well - I hate playing poor! I won't live off of charity - even Harry's."

"He did not make the offer out of charity. He did it as a friend!"

"Yeah? Well maybe he did..."

"I did," Harry added.

"But the rest of the blighters will think I live here 'cause I can't afford a decent place of my own. I am sick of that, okay?"

The other two knew Ron well enough to know this was not worth the effort of arguing over. He had real issues with looking poor. Always had.

SATURDAY - JUNE 26, 1999 - 12 GRIMMAULD PLACE, LONDON, U.K.

"Git probably got the place for his shagging pleasure," Hermione wailed. "Damn it Harry! This place is huge! Privacy would not have been an issue. I tried to tell him but he refused to listen. Son of a bitch wanted his bachelor pad so he could shag tarts while I was off at school. Did it matter we were engaged? Apparently not. BASTARD!"

"Hermione?"

"Damn it, Harry! You're supposed to be my best friend! Why didn't you tell me?"

"Tell you what?"

"Tell me Ron was fucking around on me!"

"I - I didn't know." Harry was shocked at her language. Then again, she smelled like she'd been drinking all day.

She looked at him in disbelief.

"Honestly, Hermione. I did not! I never popped by there unannounced. That's just rude. It fucking began bothering me when he would do the same. Git made a point of it during the Hols if he even thought there was a remote chance Gin was here. I like my privacy, okay? I don't invite tarts here for a cheap shag, but I like being left alone for a time. I do my socializing away from here. I assumed he would be the same way. I had no idea he was screwing around. I swear!"

She looked at Harry intently. She knew, even in her inebriated state, she knew he was telling her the truth. "When did the git learn to lie?" She asked rhetorically.

"What?"

"Come on, Harry! Ron could not lie to save his life. Not really."

"He did during the war."

"So he claims. Okay fine! He could not lie to us to save his life."

Harry nodded for it had been true.

"But he can now," Hermione continued. "What changed?"

Harry shrugged.

"Lying bastard," she said. "All this year he wrote me. He wrote and told me how much he loved me and missed me. His letters were sweet, but seemed canned somehow."

"Canned?" Harry asked.

"Like someone else wrote them. Bit too smooth for Ron, I should have seen it. Still. Damn it! I was in love with the bastard. Still..."

"I invited him to come up for each Hogsmeade Weekend. He always had an excuse and never came."

"He," Harry began. "Damn it all! I'm so sorry, Hermione."

"What?"

"I made every Weekend except one to visit Gin," Harry said. "One! As hectic as things are at the office, I could still find a few weekends to take off. I made it to all of her matches. All of them! And I've been on loads foreign and undercover assignments! Ron's not trusted with those. He has an aversion to all things Muggle, he does. He only did four in the last year and they were all during the week. He's damn good at take downs - fights - but useless at the more cloak and dagger sort of missions. Take downs are few and far between. Takes months to run a perp to the ground. The other assignments are frequent. In a way, you were lucky today. Odds are, I would not be here. Damn!"

"R-Ron said he w-was so busy," Hermione whimpered.

"He wasn't that busy. Damn it! The bastard!"

"Wh-what are you saying?"

"I don't know! Sorry, Hermione, I don't. But damn it! The git was not that busy. He could have easily spared a little time for you. Damn it! Why didn't I see it?"



"H-how c-could you know?"

"I was there! I never saw you or Ron or...Damn it all!"

'G-Ginny never told you?"

"She never did."

"I - I asked her to. I asked her to find out what Ron was up to. I asked her to tell me why he could not see me. I asked her to ask you. She never did?"

Harry shook his head.

"Bitch!"

"Hey," Harry protested!

"Sorry Harry. Maybe she forgot. It's been a bad day."

"Please don't take it out on her."

"She's supposed to be my friend!"

"She's also miffed at you."

"Why?"

"Because she says I am closer to you than to her and..."

"Harry, we've been best friends forever. She's..."

"I know. Still, it pisses her off that you and I are so close. She knows there's nothing going on, still..."

"Weasley jealousy?"

"Yeah. Throw in the fact that you were Head Girl. Her Mum was - well - she told her that how could Gin expect that honor? You were a far better student and... Still, Molly would have preferred..."

"Damn it all," Hermione exclaimed. "Fucking Weasleys! I did not covet that position!"

"I know."

"I earned it!"

"I know, Hermione."

"I need a drink!"

"Hermione, what?"

"I need a bloody belt! Got any booze in this palace?"

"You sure?"

"You're not my Daddy! I'm of age! I can have a bloody belt if I want one! If you have one! Otherwise, it's back to the Pub."

"Pub?"

"Spent a few hours there before coming over. Or hadn't you noticed?"

"I - erm."

"Well? You going to offer me a drink or what?"

"I really don't think you should..."

"I told you! You're not my goddamned Daddy! This day sucks! My life sucks! I want a drink!"

"It doesn't help, believe me."

"I DON'T CARE!"

Harry resigned. He pointed her to his bar. Better here, he thought, than in some Pub. Goodness knows what might happen to her there.

Harry watched as Hermione walked over to his bar and poured herself a disturbingly large glass of scotch.

"Hermione, are you sure you should..."

"After this afternoon, FUCK IT! I GETTING PISSED!"

"Hermione!"

"Don't Harry! Don't," she said in a near rage as she drained the glass and nearly coughed herself into oblivion. "Never had that before," she said when she regained a bit of control. She refilled her glass a couple of times, but she faded fast and was soon lying on Harry's couch drunk. Harry had never seen Hermione like this and it scared him. It scared him even more that he had no idea what to do. She was fading fast and her eyes were closing. "I love you, Harry," she slurred.

She was drunk, Harry thought - really drunk.

"Love you too," he said. He found a blanket Mrs. Weasley had knitted for him and placed it over her as she passed out. He kissed her forehead and heard an unintelligible mumble in reply. He then went upstairs to bed.

SATURDAY - JUNE 17, 2006 - NEW YORK CITY, N.Y.

Harry always wondered if she remembered what she said just before she fell asleep that night or what he said to her. He always wondered if she meant it and if so how she meant it.

## CHAPTER TWO

SUNDAY - JUNE 29, 1999 - 12 GRIMMAULD PLACE, LONDON, U.K.

Harry woke up late the next morning. It was a Sunday and he usually slept in. He had forgotten Hermione had passed out on his couch. He went down to make his breakfast and a acrid odor hit him. He then remembered Hermione. He walked into the living room and saw she had been sick all over his couch, floor, blanket and herself. At least she was still breathing, he thought, although she's going to regret that bit as soon as she starts to wake up. He decided to do his best to put off that misery for her as long as possible.

She moaned as he picked her up from the couch. He carried her to the guest room on the First Floor. With his hands full, he could not use a wand to do anything but the last year's intensive training had taught him how to use magic without any wand at all. The bed linens seemed to turn down on their own as he gently placed Hermione onto the bed. He removed her soiled blouse and slacks and blushed at seeing her in nothing but her underwear. He then tucked her in and cast a spell that would keep the room dark and another that would prevent any noise from outside to disturb her sleep. He closed the door and then left his house to deliver Hermione's clothes to the dry cleaner a block away.

When he returned he noticed a trunk and two large suitcases in his front hall he had not noticed before. Each had a noticeable "H.G." monogram. He was so preoccupied with his upset, then drunk, then sick friend, he had not noticed she had brought her luggage with her. He carried the bags up and quietly placed them in her room before retuning to clean his living room.

There was a knock at the door and Harry stopped cleaning the couch to answer it. He opened the door and his friend and Hermione's former fiancé - as of last night - was standing at the door.

"Is Hermione here?" Ron asked with more than a hint of desperation.

Harry nodded and Ron smiled slightly. "Good! I need to talk to her." His nose wrinkled at something. "What's that smell?"

"Puke," Harry said. "Hermione's somewhere between drop dead drunk and suffering from the worst hangover of her life."

"Drunk?" Ron asked. "Hermione never..."

"She was lit when she showed up and then downed far more scotch than would be advisable under any circumstances. Passed out and threw up all over the place. I don't think she'll be talking to anyone for quite some time. Maybe not until tomorrow."

If it was possible for Ron to become any paler, he just did. "What happened?"

"You tell me, Ron," Harry said getting a little annoyed.

Ron shrugged. "Always said she was mental."

"RON, YOU ARE THICK!" Harry yelled. "She came over here three sheets to the wind. She said she caught you and Lavender shagging each other's brains out yesterday afternoon, left you a message and left. My guess is she spent the next several hours in a pub somewhere."

Ron's expression seemed to be a cross between fear and surprise. "She saw that?"

"So you were getting shagged?"

"It's not what either of you think, Harry."

"What is it then?" There was real hostility in Harry's voice.

"It's nothing, really. Lavender's just got an itch that needs scratching is all and Hermione wasn't supposed to be there and - well Lavender means nothing, really."

"Maybe not to you, but to Hermione she means everything, Ron."

"Well, it's her bloody fault," Ron started. "What does she expect me to do? She's holding out on me - waiting for marriage, she says. So why shouldn't I get lucky now and then?"

"Ron, just 'cause she's holding out does not mean..."

"Don't bloody lecture me, Harry! You've been shagging my sister since she turned seventeen! You two didn't wait! Why should we?"

"I would have, Ron. And you should because that's what she wants."

"Mental," Ron mumbled.

"What do you think Ginny would do to me if she thought I was dipping my quill in another ink well."

"She'd kill you but..."

"She would kill me regardless of whether we were doing it or not. Dipping your wick might not be a big deal to you, but it's a huge deal to women. Don't be surprised if Lavender thinks there's more to the two of you than just your willingness to scratch her itch!"

After a long pause, Ron said: "It's Hermione I love, you know."

"And right now she hates you, Ron. Maybe she'll get over it. But don't expect her to soon. Even when she gets over her current condition, I doubt she'll talk to you. Maybe when she gets back..."

MONDAY - JUNE 28, 1999 - 12 GRIMMAULD PLACE, LONDON, U.K.

"What happened to me the other night?" Hermione asked Harry having just finished three large helpings of his lasagna.

"You were drunk, you got drunker, you passed out, you threw up," Harry replied.

"Sorry Harry."

Harry shrugged.

"Nothing happened between us?"

"No. Why do you ask?"

"When I finally woke up, my clothes were gone."

"You threw up on them."

Hermione nodded.

"I took them to the dry cleaners and they are in the hall closet."

"Thanks Harry."

"Do you remember why you were so drunk?"

"I left Ron," she huffed.

"Just making sure."

"I can stay here, right? At least until I leave to find my parents?"

"When's that?"

"My flight is on the tenth."

"Yes, you can stay. But I can't take off work to keep you company."

"I wouldn't ask that of you Harry, thank you." Harry saw tears in her eyes.

"I have nowhere else to go, Harry."

"You're always welcome here, Hermione."

Hermione smiled. Harry could not smile back as he placed her dinner before her and took his seat across from her. She was a wreck when she arrived and yesterday, when she finally woke up, she was horribly hung over. She did not say much at all, too sick to talk Harry figured. He merely asked her what she remembered - if anything - from the day before. She remembered most of it.

"Ron talked to me at work today," Harry said. Hermione merely grunted.

"He was here yesterday as well when you were..." She merely shrugged. "He wants to talk to you."

"Fat chance," Hermione said. "Are you suggesting he should? Are you trying to help him get me back, because if you are..." She was beginning to get angry.

"No I am not," Harry said firmly. "Merely relaying the message."

"Good, 'cause I never want to see him again!"

Harry nodded. "You probably should tell him that - in person."

"WHY WOULD I WANT TO DO THAT? WHY?"

"I'm not saying you should want to," Harry said calmly. "He seems to think you making a big deal about nothing."

"WHAT?"

"Practically his words. Thinks if you two talk, this will blow over."

"And what do you think, Harry?" She said icily.

"Stupid git's got his head so far up his ass he as to fart to breath," Harry deadpanned.

She calmed down and actually smiled again. "What did you tell him?"

"Told him there was a better chance that Voldemort would return than you would."

She actually laughed. "How'd he take that?"

"Asked who's side I was on."

"And?"

"I told him the right side."

"What'd he say?"

EARLIER THAT DAY



"Thank goodness! I was afraid you might pick her over me," Ron said. "So you'll help me?"

"No," Harry said gravely. "I told you I picked the right side."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"You brought this one on all by yourself. I'll relay a message, but I am not going to help you fix this."

"But Harry! I thought we were mates?"

"Right now, the operative word is 'were.' You broke her heart, Ron. I'll be damned if I knowingly give you a chance to do it again."

"So, you're picking her over me?"

"You made that choice, Ron! You did! She was your fiancé. You're supposed to remain faithful to..."

"That's a load of dung! It's not like we're actually married yet!"

"Should be."

"So you're telling me you have not had an occasional roll in the sack when Ginny was away?"

"I have not."

"I don't believe you!"

"Fine. Don't. But it is true."

"Mental. They all are!"

"Perhaps," Harry said.

"So she's staying with you?"

"Far as I know she has nowhere else to go, so yeah, I guess."

"What do you mean nowhere else to go? What about her parents?"

"Still in Australia."

"Oh. The Burrow?"

"I don't think she's in the mood for dealing with your family."

"The Leaky Cauldron, then."

"Not sure how she's fixed for money, Ron. Even if she has some, her trip to find her parents won't come cheap."

"Kick her out! Kick her out!"

"I'm not going to do that Ron."

"Fine, but I'm telling Ginny!"

"Fine."

MONDAY - JUNE 28, 1999 - 12 GRIMMAULD PLACE, LONDON, U.K.

"So," Hermione said with anger, "he wants you to help him get us back together and yet he also wants you to kick me out in the cold?"

"Basically."

"Is he mental?"

"I - ," Harry shrugged.

"Does he honestly think I'll go running back to him and beg him to take me back again?"

Harry shrugged. "Maybe there's a chapter in that damned book of his that tells how to win back the witch you cheated on."

"Book? What book? What are you talking about?"

"I'll show you," Harry said and he got up from the table. "Back in a bit." He came back later and handed her a book that looked brand new.

"Twelve Fail Safe Ways to Charm Witches," she asked? "WHAT THE BLOODY HELL IS THIS ABOUT?"

Harry shrugged.

"YOU DON'T KNOW?"

"Never bothered to read it," Harry admitted. "Ron has. Swears by it. Some kind of dating guide, I think."

"Why do you have a copy," Hermione asked suspiciously?

"He gave me one for my seventeenth birthday. Told me it works wonders."

"Did he now?" She practically growled.

"You two were getting along pretty well at the time as I recall."

"Only because he seemed to be ... you mean?"

"Probably got some pointers from that thing," Harry smiled.

"I don't know whether I should be flattered or insulted!"

Harry looked into her eyes and raised an eyebrow.

"I mean, I guess it was something to get the git to actually read a book. But to think he used it to get me? I think insulted! IF HE THINKS FOR ONE MINUTE I AM GOING TO TAKE HIM BACK..."

"He told me he does."

"HE'S MISTAKEN!"

Harry nodded. "I happen to agree with you, 'Mione. Cheating on a floozy like Lavender is one thing. Cheating on you, totally different. Seems he's been doing both."

"WHAT? How do you know?"

"Git told me today. Said something about taking advantage of our overseas assignments to - well."

"Dip his wick?"

"Didn't come right out and say it, but yeah."

"How did that come up?"

"He could not believe I remain faithful to Ginny."

"He can be thick, BUT I NEVER KNEW HE WAS THAT STUPID! IMMATURE! INSECURE! FUCK HIM!"

"No thanks," Harry said. "Seems everybody has."

Hermione actually laughed.

"Slut boy," Harry added and was rewarded with another laugh.

"You really are on my side in this, Harry?"

"I am. You're right, he's wrong."

"And Ginny? Where do you think she'll come down?"

"If my guess is right, she'll be pissed as hell for not supporting her brother."

"WHAT?"

"Weasleys are strange that way, haven't you noticed? They can hate each other, but an outsider - like you or me - an outsider mess with them? They band together against you."

"And you are willing to..."

"You're right, he's wrong. He has no right to break your heart and then expect me to be okay with it. No right to expect me not to take your side, Hermione. NONE!"

"And if Ginny sides with her family?"

"If she truly loves me, she won't."

"And if she does?"

"Hermione, I pick you."

"Th-thank you, Harry," she said softly.

SATURDAY - JUNE 17, 2006 - NEW YORK CITY, N.Y.

"You haven't spoken to Ron in years," Hermione asked?

"Not since the divorce. Even before then, we were hardly friends."

"Divorce? Hardly friends?"

"To begin with, he never really forgave me for taking your side after the 'Lavender Incident.' Never. I never really cared because you were right and he was wrong. Best mates before, after Ron and I were not chummy at all. We were civil to one another for a while - had to be considering I did marry his sister. But when I divorced her, well..."

"You divorced?"

"Technically, it was an annulment under the law."

"But I thought she dumped you!"

"She did - for a time..."

FRIDAY - JULY 2, 1999 - 12 GRIMMAULD PLACE, LONDON, U.K.

"Ginny's coming over," Harry said over dinner.

"Great," Hermione said happily. Ginny was her best girlfriend. "I'd love to see her!"

"I don't know. I don't think you would now."

"Why?"

"I think she's pissed at me because you're here. You left Ron, which makes you a traitor in her book and are here with me which makes you a threat. Something tells me I'm not getting lucky tonight."

"I'm sure you're exaggerating, Harry."

"She has a short temper and a jealous streak," Harry said. "And she's furious I am refusing to do what she wants me to do."

"What's that?"

"Kick you out."

"She never said that."

"No, but that's what she meant. She never understood us, Hermione. Never. She thinks there's more to us than just being friends."

"But..."

Deep down Hermione now knew she and Harry were more than just friends and she hoped Harry knew it too. They had been practically in love since they met on the train to school all those years ago. She would do anything for him, anything! She knew it was at least almost the same for him, but he could be so thick about his emotions and such! She began to realize, finally, that she was in love with Harry - truly - and had been for ages. Ron was a fancy, not much more. She had been with Ron because he acted like a boyfriend. But it was displaced love? Like displaced aggression maybe? Now there was a thought. It is and always has been Harry. Not the bloody 'Boy-Who-Lived' - HARRY! If only he felt the same way about me, she thought sadly. Little did she know, he did. He had yet to admit it to himself, but for years all others had been compared to her and found wanting - even Ginny.

The doorbell rang. At least, Harry thought, at least she - meaning Ginny - had the decency to ring the bell.

"Ah! The Wicked Witch of the West! Speak of the Devil," Harry laughed.

"HARRY," Hermione shot back!

"Just a joke," Harry said. I hope - he thought to himself. He got up to answer the door.

"Ginny," Harry said seeing his fiancé at the door. He leaned in for a hug and a kiss and found nothing.

"Don't bother Potter," she hissed. "Is that bitch hear?"

"Bitch?"

"You know!"

"Nope. No Lavender Brown here, Gin. Sorry. Try Ron's place."

"I MEANT HERMIONE!"

"What's your problem with Hermione?"

"SHE DUMPED MY BROTHER!"

"Actually, it was kind of the other way around, Gin."

"NO IT WASN'T! WHAT DID MY BROTHER EVER DO TO DESERVE THAT?"

"Oh, let's see? Fuck around? Get caught shagging Lavender only a few days ago? Admit to getting shagged on overseas assignment? Basically spend the last year getting shagged left and right while his fiancé was at school?"

"HE DID NOT!"

"Most certainly, he did. Git admitted as much to me! Didn't seem to be a concern for him at all!"

"So you're taking her side in this?"

"Lavender's? Hardly."

"HERMIONE'S, YOU GIT!"

"Of course. Ron's the bitch in this one, Gin."

"HE'S MY BROTHER!"

"So's Percy. So what?"

"HE'S YOUR BEST FRIEND!"

"Was. No more."

"KICK HER OUT!"

"I told you Lav-Lav is not here."

"HERMIONE! KICK HER OUT OR ELSE!"

"What?"

"OR ELSE WE'RE THROUGH!"

"Nice knowing you, Gin. Have a nice life. Good night," Harry said exceedingly calmly.

"WHAT?"

"I said 'Good night.' That means LEAVE!"

"YOU MUST BE JOKING!"

"You can keep the ring, if you like. But LEAVE!"

"You're throwing away all we have..."

"If you support your git brother, we have nothing."

"I can't believe this! He's a hero!"

"He's a bigger git than Malfoy."

"MALFOY'S A DEATH EATER!"

"He saw the light, Gin. He's still a world class ass, but at least he doesn't pretend not to be. Same can't be said for the useless waste of air you call a brother."

"HE'S A WEASLEY!"

"In that case, same applies to you. Have a nice life, Gin."



"You can't."

"I just did. See you."

"Y-you c-can't. You love me..."

"True. But not right now. If you come back and apologize, if you realize your brother is a tart tracker and admit it, then maybe you are worth my time and affection."

"YOU CAN'T!"

"I'm not kicking Hermione out."

"I DEMAND YOU DO!"

"Sorry. Ain't happening."

"FINE! WE'RE OVER! I HOPE YOU BURN IN HELL!"

"Sorry. Already have, Gin. Good night."

Harry then closed the door. He ignored her pounding and ended up placing a silencing charm on the door, as well as additional wards on the house to keep Ginny out.

"Harry," Hermione said in a hurt voice. Harry turned and saw tears flowing from her big, brown eyes. "Maybe I should leave. Maybe I should stay at the Leaky Cauldron or something."

"NO," Harry said! Hermione could not tell if he was angry, scared or desperate.

"It would be better for everyone," she began.

"No! No it would not. This isn't your fault. None of this is your fault, Hermione."

"Harry..."

"No! Ever since we've know each other, you've gone out of your way to help me. You've made sacrifices I never asked for to help me.

You helped me no matter what the cost to you. You are the most selfless and caring person I've ever known and I've never..."

"Harry?"

"I've never really thanked you or repaid the favor."

"You don't have to."

"Yes I do!"

"But I've ruined..."

"I told you, Hermione, none of this is your fault. NONE OF IT! You are the victim here. Not me nor the others. Everything that seems to be going wrong all boils down to an immature, insecure git named Ronald Weasley."

"I cost you his friendship," she cried.

"HE COST ME HIS FRIENDSHIP," Harry replied. "He broke your heart. He did it in the cruelest and most selfish way imaginable. I don't think I can ever forgive him for that. YOU DID NOT DESERVE THAT."

"I must have done something for him to..."

"The only thing you did was give him your heart so he could gleefully stomp on it, Hermione. The git has not told me everything, and I doubt he ever will. But, my guess is he's been taking advantage of his fame and small fortune since not long after you boarded the Hogwarts Express last September. He did what he did because he thought he could and you'd be none the wiser."

"Perhaps if I had let him..."

"No! He used that as an excuse, Hermione! If he truly loved you, he would have respected your decision and would have honored his commitment to you. That respect and honor went out the door soon after you were out of sight as far as I can figure."

"Harry..."

"This is NOT your fault. None of it. Letting you stay here is the least I can do for you."

"But Ginny?"

"Should realize that at some point her new family - meaning me - is supposed to be more important than her old family when it counts. She does not see that. Maybe she never will. She's acting like a spoiled child and so long as she does, I am not interested."

"But I've cost you your best mate, your fiancé,,,"

"It's not your fault, Hermione. It's not. Ron cost me his friendship and it's because of her ignorant loyalty to a brother she could barely stand that Ginny is out of my life for now. None of that is your fault. You've made sacrifices for me, Hermione. It's my turn to make sacrifices for you."

"W-why?"

"Everyone I've ever cared about has either died or left me. Everyone except you. You're the best friend I've ever had and can ever hope to have and I can't lose you too. I want to help you because I love you, Hermione."

"You - you what?"

"I love you, Hermione," Harry said. "That's what friends do."

"Oh," she said. She did not understand why she was so disappointed in that statement. Still...

"Thank you Harry," she said walking into a hug. "I love you too. But I'm leaving you too, you know." She felt Harry nod. "I don't know when I'll be back." Or if, she thought.

"I know," Harry said.

Does he really?

"But no matter how long you're away, I want to know that there is one true friend out there - one person who loves me."

"I will always," Hermione whispered.

SATURDAY - JUNE 17, 2006 - NEW YORK CITY, N.Y.

"As you may recall, Hermione," Harry said, "I also kind of dumped her as well."

Hermione chuckled a little. "You did indeed. But I seem to recall that most thought she dumped you."

"What?" Harry said in mock shock. "Well of course she did. Little Princess had never been dumped before and would be damned if she ever really was. The papers were all on about how I humiliated her - not that I gave a rat's fart about the papers by then. The only morons more useless than the Rita Skeeters of this world are the idiots who read the trash. Much to my regret, a few months later, she came back begging me to forgive her and I did. Second biggest mistake of my life."

"Second biggest?"

"Ginny and I married in December 1999. I divorced her about three years later. That marriage was a bloody nightmare from the beginning. Should have known better than to marry a 'Boy-Who-Lived' groupie. She wanted the fame and all that and I wanted no part of it. She did not care about me really. She's a professional Quiddich player, you know. Signed with the Harpies not long after you left. How did I her fiancé find out? Did she tell me? Nope. Read about it in the sports section. She's a great player, you know. Captained England in the last World Cup and England won for the first time in 300 years. Outside of Quiddich, she's useless. She was never around. Wanted me to quit my job to carry her friggin' bags. When we were home together we always got into a fight. Didn't take long to realize she did not really want to have kids or a family, just the name and glory. So I divorced her. It was not pretty. She wanted half my estate - HALF. By then she was the highest paid player in the league. The Court saw reason. She got 500 Galleons. Didn't even cover her legal bills," Harry chuckled. "Ron was furious I left her without a cent, as it were. We had words and he can rot. The only silver lining was we had no kids."

"I'm sorry, Harry."

"Don't be. I was sick of her by then. I wanted out. I was thinking of 'pulling a Granger,' as they said back then and just taking off. A friend of mine found an 'out' clause. Technically, it was not a divorce, it was an annulment. Legally, we never were married."

"What?"

"The conditions necessary to form a legally binding contract were not met. It would take a while to explain, but the bottom line is that sham of a marriage was declared invalid and I was freed from that red-headed nightmare. Haven't heard from her since."

"I thought you liked her at least."

"I did once. The whole 'Lavender Incident' changed everything. Ron was a git. Gin was a sex pot, but a groupie. Still, for some pathetic reason I did marry her. The experience is probably why I've been single ever since."

"W-why," Hermione wondered why she was pleased to hear that.

Harry shrugged. "I never knew much about women," he admitted. "Still don't it seems. Then again, I am considered the most eligible bachelor in all wizarding Europe so most of the women I meet see my fame and bank accounts and not me. If it weren't for my job, I might just be miserable. Oh well."

"I'm sorry, Harry."

"Why? It's not your fault."

"I - I just... All I ever wanted was for you to be happy. It's clear you're not. I'm sorry."

"Hermione, it's not your fault. It's mine. I followed a path that I thought was mine and it wasn't. Warning signs everywhere and I ignored them. You might have seen them, you always did. I didn't."

"The 'Lavender Incident' should have taught me to stay clear of the 'she-weasel' as a good friend of mine calls Ginny these days. He saw right through her from the start. But, I didn't trust him back then."

Still don't, not entirely. Burned one time too many, I suppose. Still, Malfoy can be..."

"Malfoy," Hermione asked in shock? "You mean Draco Malfoy?"

"Irony, isn't it? He can still be an ass, but he's a good friend now. He was a friend even then, though no one knew it at the time."

"I don't believe it!"

"Sad but true. Ron and I were never close after that summer. Malfoy was soon an up and comer in the Chief Prosecutor's Office. They say I catch 'em, he fries 'em. We became the one team perps do not want on their case. Still, even then..."

"He can be brutally honest, Hermione. Crudely so. Took me a while to see that most of his post-war vitriol was honesty unleashed. After the 'Lavender Incident' he told me to steer clear of the two youngest Weasels. Foolishly I did not. Should have seen the outcome."

"Ginny made me make Ron my Best Man at her - and I mean her wedding. My first choice was Neville. He was and is my best mate by then. No. She wanted family. She hoped I would see the light. Bloody disaster. Had to put up with Malfoy's 'I told you so' for months. Ron made an ass of himself at the Rehearsal Dinner. There was Ginny, crying her ass off 'cause her brother and my Best Man was such a scandal and all I could do was say that I told her so. Not a good way to start a marriage. Then, just months later, I had to fire him for compromising a sensitive operation. Ron was a lousy Auror."

"You fired him?"

"I wrote him up. He was shagging the daughter of our mark - a Death Eater who had evaded us for almost two years. Ron brags to his shags. She tipped Daddy Deadly off and he was gone just as we set up to take him down. Ron was given a choice: resign or be prosecuted. He at least did the honorable thing and took the hint. He had a family to feed, after all."

"What?"

"Ron works with his brother George now. He married Lavender a few weeks after you left..."

"HE WHAT?"

"Had to, it seems. She gave birth to their first kid less than five months later. Seems he'd been shagging her since just after you went back to school. Seems she's also never heard of the concept of birth control. Last I heard, they had four kids and another on the way."

"I don't believe it," Hermione started.

WEDNESDAY - JULY 7, 1999 - AUROR SECTION, DEPARTMENT OF MAGICAL LAW ENFORCEMENT, MINISTRY FOR MAGIC, LONDON, U.K.

"I'm in deep shit, Harry," Ron said at lunch.

"I'll say."

"No, not just with Hermione. Although if - when she finds out I'll be in deeper shit with her."

"Oh?"

"Lavender's pregnant."

"What?"

"She's got MY bun in HER oven, Harry. And she intends to have it!"

"When?"

"Says she's due in December. What the hell am I going to do, Harry?"

"Told you."

"I know. Women are bloody mental."

"Maybe you should look in the mirror."

"What's than supposed to mean?"

Harry shrugged.

"She insists I do right by her," Ron moped.

"Meaning?"

"Marry her! I can't. Hermione..."

"Doesn't want you, remember?"

"She'll come around. She always does."

"I don't think she'll change her mind about you this time. This was one hurt she won't get over and one transgression she'll never forgive."

"Mental."

"Human."

WEDNESDAY - JULY 7, 1999 - 12 GRIMMAULD PLACE, LONDON, U.K.

Hermione had little to do that day. She had purchased her plane ticket to Australia and had spent a few days getting ready. She had seen Bill Weasley about her finances. It turned out the award she had received from the government was worth far more than she had imagined. If she lived frugally, she could live a modest yet comfortable - if boring - life without ever needing a job. Two Million Pounds at four percent per year was a lot of money by anyone's standards.

She had purchased a one way ticket to Australia. It was a practical decision she had made way back when she had sent her parents into involuntary exile during the War. She had erased their memories. Robert and Rose Granger, parents of one Hermione Granger, partners in a successful dental practice in Loughton, Essex - a suburb of London - now believed they were Wendell and Monica Wilkens, dentists married to one another who had no children and certainly never had a daughter. They also had always dreamed of living in Australia. Hermione used her magic - for she was a bona fide witch - to alter their reality to save them from the War that was



ravaging her world. She knew how powerful the charm she used was and knew she had no idea how long it might take to find them.

She was worried, though. They had resisted going overseas. She had to use her magic on them in the end. They might not be happy about that when she found them - if she found them. She thought she had done a good job two years ago, but over those two years she had learned that while she was smart, she was not perfect. She prayed that when the spell was lifted, they would forgive her.

What if they didn't? What if they hated her? She did not know if she could deal with that - especially now.

What if they did, but did not want to return home? Could she leave them again? If her family was not in Britain, what reason was there for her to return now that Ron was out of her life? Harry? He was a dear friend. He was more than that. He was everything to her. But was that enough? Was it enough if she was not everything to him? She had been receiving mixed signals for days now. She loved Harry as a friend, but now knew she could not come home to Britain just to remain his friend. Unless he gives me a better reason - as in ... - maybe I should consider staying away from this place, she thought. By place, she meant Britain - and Harry, although it broke her heart yet again to consider leaving her friend.

We need time, she thought. Part of her disagreed. She did not, but until he did not, what was the point? Still, why had the last couple of weeks almost been so happy for her? She should be miserable. Why wasn't she? She liked to think he had been waiting on her hand and foot, but that was not entirely true. He made dinner and after they would talk or just sit in the Living Room and read or watch the telly. There were a few days when he and Neville were partnered for a surveillance operation - he told her the basics, but not the specifics. He still managed to come home in the evenings and cook her a meal - and another portion he would then take to Neville. He would keep Neville's portion warm while he spent a couple of hours keeping her company. Damn, she thought! Ron hated my cooking - so did Harry, but he was gracious about it - yet he can cook and is not looking to ... damn!

Why did I ever get involved with that toerag, she thought? He was a friend, true enough. But I should have seen it. He never took me seriously. He never really listened to me about anything - unless I

was complimenting him about something. He was fun to be around, at least until he said something stupid - which was often. I should have known! Why did I let myself fall for that selfish, insecure, immature git? You know why! You were afraid to follow your heart. You were afraid to fall for Harry. Why? We always got along! Because you had no idea if he saw you as more than just a friend. Sometimes, it seemed that he did, sometimes not. Mixed signals. Better to have Harry as a friend than to ruin it by trying to push the relationship in a direction only one of us wants, she tried to convince herself.

If Harry was sending her mixed signals, Hermione herself was so confused. She was confused by her own feelings. She had usually been able to master them - control them since she was a little girl. It was her defense mechanism that had saved her from loneliness and despair on countless occasions as a child. Until she was almost twelve, until she met Harry, she had never had any real friends - not one. There were a few kids she knew in school who were nice to her on occasion, but she was always alone. She remembered her eighth birthday. It fell on a Saturday and her Mum offered to throw her a party so she could invite her friends. How could she tell her Mum she didn't have any friends? She couldn't. Her Mum seemed so eager. So she invited some classmates from her primary school - the ones who were not mean to her. She was not surprised when none of them came. She should have been heartbroken, but she was not. Her mother was. Her mother could not understand why Hermione was not upset by the obvious snub.

Harry had ruined her nice, safe walls. Chip by chip, over the years, at least for him, her emotional castle fell. It began when he was genuinely nice to her practically from her first day at Hogwarts. Everyone else seemed to ignore her, but Harry did not. Then again, Harry was nice to everyone in their dorm. He was the only one who remembered she was missing the night a Troll had been set loose in the school. He had dragged Ron with him to find her. She had only recently learned that Ron had no interest in finding her that day. Seconds from certain death, Harry and Ron came to her rescue. How could a girl not admire her knights in shining armor? Why did she fall for the wrong one?

Somehow, Harry had learned when her birthday was. Hermione never recalled telling him. After her eighth birthday fiasco, she could care less about anyone aside from her parents remembering.

September 19, 1992, she turned thirteen. Ironically, she now thought, it was another Saturday. He had asked her to meet him in an empty classroom that afternoon. She came. She wondered what Harry was on about. She walked in and only Harry was there.

SATURDAY - SEPTEMBER 19, 1992 - HOGWARTS SCHOOL OF WITCHCRAFT AND WIZARDY.

Hermione walked into the class room and saw her friend Harry standing there.

"I thought you were supposed to be at practice," she said with a hint of accusation in her voice.

"Wood's working Chaser Drills today. No need for a Seeker. Besides, there are more important things than Quidditch."

"Hmph," Hermione huffed. She happened to agree with that statement. "Well, you'd never know that around here!"

"It's true," Harry said with a smile. "Look at Ron, for example."

"It's all he ever talks about," Hermione groaned.

"Think about it, 'Mione. What is more important to Ron than Quidditch?"

Hermione thought long and hard about that one. "I give up," she confessed.

"Do you think for one minute he would skip a meal to see a Quidditch Match," Harry chortled?

Hermione actually laughed. Harry had hit on Ron's true passion - stuffing his face. "Okay," she confessed, "you got me there. But what about you, Harry? What's more important to you?"

"My friends," Harry said. He paused and then added, "and their birthdays."

Hermione was left speechless and watched as a set of curtains were pulled back.

"SURPRISE," several voices called out at once. Hermione was speechless. Standing before her were every member of her class in Gryffindor House, her Dorm: Harry, Ron, Dean Thomas, Neville Longbottom, Seamus Finnegan, Parvati Patil, Lavender Brown and Sally Ann Perks. Also there were Ron's older brothers Fred and George - which could only mean trouble, she thought - Lee Jordan, Angelina Johnson and Katie Bell - all were a year or two ahead of her in school and Ginny Weasley, who was a year behind. Hagrid was there as well.

"Happy Birthday, Hermione," Harry said.

There was a table laden with food and a huge cake. There were also presents. Hermione could not help herself. She hugged Harry and cried tears of joy.

Most of her gifts were simple and edible. She had enough candy to give her parents - who were dentists and had never allowed her sweets - a fit. Harry, however, had bought her books. Not magical books as she expected, but works of literature. It turned out that once the Weasley Twins had liberated Harry from his Aunt and Uncle's place, he had sent her parents a letter and asked them about her birthday and what she might want for a present. They had never said anything to her about it.

